

Meditations given at the meeting of the House of Bishops, Chicago, Ill.
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--by John Booty

The Church: Its Nature Ministry and Mission

Prologue

In October 1966, the House of Bishops, meeting at Wheeling, West Virginia, after much debate voted to censure the Bishop of California, James Pike. The concrete issues were doctrinal but the theological and social ferment of the time complicated the issues and raised fundamental questions concerning the church, its ministry and mission. Thus it was that John Hines, Presiding Bishop, appointed a committee to advise the House on a number of unresolved questions generated at the Wheeling meeting, beginning with what was perhaps most important: "What obligations does the Church have for encouraging theological enquiry and social criticism?" John Knox, Episcopalian and New Testament scholar, prepared a statement for the committee in the course of which he gave a definition of the Church. His definition has greatly affected me. I have chosen it as the basis for our meditations. In part the statement is impressive because of the way it recalls New Testament passages and historical events and in part because it belongs to the age in which we live, which on its dark side is an age of alienation and conflict in society and individualization and privatization in religion. The definition is this:

The Church is "a fellowship in the love of God,
and its mission is to be the constantly growing
sphere of a constantly deepening reconciliation."

1. The Church is "a fellowship"

Saint Paul said to the Christian at Rome: "We though many are one body in Christ and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5). We are a people, a people united in a shared memory of Jesus Christ and a shared experience of the Spirit--the Spirit experienced in the life-giving presence of Christ crucified and risen.

I have a vision of this people, all sorts and conditions, capable of heroic self-sacrifice, marred by sin and finitude, of every race and nationality, rich and poor, well fed and malnourished, a great and variegated company gathered around a table, in communion with God and with one another in God, partaking of the bread of life in Word and Sacrament, feeding one another, loving each other, caring for those amongst them in pain, giving thanks for the love and care they receive from others and receiving are enabled to give for the love and care of their neighbors. Koinonia, fellowship, conjoins and enables. The Church is a most wonderful fellowship.

Is it in fact? Is the Church really a fellowship? The skeptic points to the facts. The Church is not only divided but is divisive. As a historian I know only too well the ways in which the people of God--the Church--have obstructed the realization of fellowship, perpetrating heinous crimes, from the crusades to apartheid. I have known congregations better characterized by partisanship than fellowship. I have known people excluded from full fellowship because of race or sex or nationality, because of convictions or opinions strongly held, because of poverty and appearance, because of moral flaws. And I have been aware of how the individualization and privatization of religion in America has worked against the realization of ecclesial fellowship--God's koinonia. How sad it is to hear Sheila

Larsen in Robert Bellah's Habits of the Heart say, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." By and large as Americans we applaud such sentiments. Is it really necessary that Sheila go to church? Surely it is sufficient that she believes in God and is satisfied. Our churches are too often cultivators of such religion, individualized, privatized, self-serving, self-defeating. Is the Church a fellowship or is it a kind of shopping mall providing goods and services, self-help aids and agreeable values, to those in search of self-realization and approbation?

I am not going to argue here for the necessity of understanding the need for fellowship and the values inherent in realizing the Church as a fellowship. In truth, the Church is a fellowship. We need to remember, again and again, that it is a fellowship, and that this fellowship is not of our own making. It is God's doing, God's gracious gift, an expression of God's love toward humanity and all of creation. Richard Hooker, the judicious Elizabethan divine, taught that the fellowship which is the Church is rooted and grounded in the fellowship which is the Holy Trinity. He would have us fix our attention on God who forms the Church "out of the verie flesh, the very wounded and bleeding side of the Sonne of man. His bodie crucified and his blood shed for the life of the world," Hooker said, "are the true elements of that heavenlie beinge, which maketh us such as himselfe is of whom we com" (Lawes V.56.7). Through the Church God reaches out to bring us into communion, thereby expressing not only the infinite extent of the divine compassion, but the fundamental nature and purpose of the Church.

Here, in ecclesia, my deepest yearnings are satisfied, my need as a human ^{be}ing met, my need, that is, for fellowship that I may discover

who I am and grow toward fuller realization of God's purpose for me, grow toward the perfection of humanity realized in Christ Jesus. In fellowship I learn to receive in order that I ~~am~~^{may} give, I learn to accept the sacrificial love of God in Christ and to serve sacrificially, and I am fed and empowered by the Spirit of God--the Go-between God, as John Taylor says, living as an agent for the cultivation of fellowship. To be in fellowship is to be engaged in Christ's ministry and mission of reconciliation whereby salvific fellowship grows, and peace and justice are realized in earth. Therefore, we rightly rejoice, that God's action in giving us this fellowship meets our deepest yearnings, our deepest need, which is to be led out of loneliness and alienation into fellowship. Praise God: the Church is "a fellowship"--God makes it so.

It is, however, an imperfect fellowship. There is a profound truth in the realization that the Church is not the Kingdom of God. Indeed, the Church, divinely created and sustained, is far less than the Kingdom which it serves. It is by definition a fellowship, but as such it is not static. No, rather, it is dynamic, it is a fellowship in process of realization, constantly in process of realization. It is, as it were, a people sent on mission into the world, taking the form of an earthly institution, an institution amongst institutions, taking risks as it seeks to proclaim the Gospel in terms contemporary cultures can hear and understanding, in terms inevitably inadequate in the light of the Gospel, thus in obedience entering into the compromises, sharing in the ambiguities of society, appearing to be more institution than fellowship.

It is in the light of this inevitable imperfection that we affirm the need for reform and renewal, the need for contrition and repentance, which in this context is not morbid but essential and life-giving. Reform is integral to the church's being as the church--koinonia.

Reinhold Niebuhr shed light on this conviction by locating in Renaissance and Reformation/pretension and humility necessary elements in the Christian life, complementary, inter-related elements, Renaissance pretension and human self-confidence being necessary to counteract the moral and cultural defeatism insipient in Reformation humility, and Reformation humility necessary to counteract the insipient urge in Renaissance pretension to diminish and dismiss the need for humility, the need for grace. Look to the history of the Church and you cannot escape the reality of this dynamic yin and yang, dynamic interaction of contrary elements of pretension and humility. Both are there; both are necessary.

To my mind one of the strengths of Anglicanism has been its understanding of this dynamic and its resistance, not always consistent, to the extremes on each side, which is resistance to grace-denying pretension and to moral and cultural defeatism. This understanding is found in Hooker's attempt to preserve freedom in the individual while insisting on the necessity of grace. The human possesses aptness toward the good, he said, while lacking ability to do the good without God's enabling grace. Reform, thus, one might say, contrition, humility is integral, for human freedom and self-confidence (as controlled by humility) are essential to the work of proclaiming the Gospel in terms understood by those not yet owning membership in the fellowship.

From another angle we understand the "imperfection" of the Church (it is less than the Kingdom of God) in terms of the dynamics involved in the realization of fellowship. Richard Hooker was careful to say that koinonia or mutual participation is not the blending of one with another, so that individuality is obliterated. Koinonia involves the encounter of one with another in which resistance is experienced in such ways that individuality is enhanced in communion. You cannot have

fellowship without individuality anymore than you can have individuality without fellowship. Fellowship involves the interaction of individuals and individuals require the interaction in order to realize their selfhood, their individuality. And so koinonia is characterized by interaction or, as I prefer to say, fellowship is characterized by tension, tension that is creative, life-giving in the context of faithfulness. There is destructive tension, of course, but the tension involved in the resistance of selves in communion with one another enhances individuals with a richness surpassing anything an individual can anticipate. There is something to learn here, I believe, about the place of pain and suffering in the Christian life. The realization of the Church as a fellowship involves pain, the pain of creative tension, the growing pains of the Christian.

There is also the fact that the Church in any particular place--and everywhere--is a unity in diversity, a diversity in unity. It is a fellowship composed of widely differing people, races and cultures, economic conditions and educational attainments. The diversity enriches the fellowship, but also creates tension, stretching the boundaries, testing the resilience of the fellowship. Furthermore, we have in the Church people at different stages of understanding, with different degrees of commitment, at different places along the way from habitual righteousness to actual righteousness, as the sixteenth century might put it. We might rather say that the Church is peopled with Christians at different stages in faith development. This condition of diversity, so it seems to me, is an integral part or dimension of the Church as fellowship, an evidence of the essential dynamic characterizing this "imperfect" but life-giving fellowship.

People looking on the fellowship from outside may, indeed, seeing the diversity, the dynamism inherent there, conclude on the basis of a sentimental view that there is little if any fellowship. And, sad to say,

there will be people within the fellowship who, experiencing acute pain in spiritual growth, or much worse, experiencing alienation, rejection, exclusion, conclude that the Church is hypocritical, that there is no fellowship. But that which at times appears to be and is imperfection also yields evidence of an inherent and necessary strength. The fellowship is not static, it is alive with the activity of the Holy Spirit working among (and within) people of amazing diversity to nurture people, building up the body in order that all "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God," which is to say until all realize the fullness of humanity revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus is the Church the instrument of God for bringing in the Kingdom of God.

Saint Paul taught the Christians at Rome, "We though many are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." Richard Hooker cited this passage and said:

they which belonge to the mysticall bodie of our Saviour Christ and be in number as the starres of heaven, devided successivelie by reason of theire mortall condition into manie generations, are notwithstanding coupled everie one to Christ theire head and all unto everie person amongst them selves, in as much as the same Spirit, which annointed the blessed soule of our Saviour Christ, doth so formelize unite and actuate his whole race, as if both he and they were so manie limmes compacted into one bodie, by beinge quickned all with one and the same soul (Lawes, V.56.11).

Fellowship, then, is gift, God's gracious gift. It is not something we create; it is something we are privileged to experience. It is something we receive for our souls' health and for God's sake. The best we can do is to allow God's Spirit to work in our midst. That is not easy, as we know, but it is essential. And having done that, however tentatively, however imperfectly, we are then called upon to co-operate with

God, agents of God's Spirit, promoting fellowship in the world--not some soupy, sentimental caricature of fellowship, but real fellowship, dynamic, full of tension, diverse and rich in its diversity, reflecting in its uneven life the perfect fellowship in the Kingdom of God.

To live so as not to obstruct God's Spirit, to be an agent of God's Spirit for the increase of fellowship requires that we take seriously the essential rhythm of the spiritual life, the rhythm of contrition and thanksgiving, contrition and thanksgiving, contrition and thanksgiving.... until it becomes as a heart beat, the heart beating in tune with the universe, a reflection of the heart beat of Deity--our contrition and thanksgiving mirroring the divine humility, contrition being the mirroring of God's self-emptying in and through Jesus Christ, mirrored as we bow down before God, give over to the working of God's Spirit, thanksgiving being the mirror of God's glory, God's radiance flowing out toward and into the very substance of creation in love, mirrored in us as we worship God and love our neighbors, joining the heavenly hosts in the great Te Deum, the anthem of praise that flows out to others with pardon, healing, and liberation.

The Church is a fellowship. God forgive, God be praised. God forgive our obstruction of the Spirit working to increase fellowship in this world, God be praised that in spite of our obstruction, the Spirit is at work increasing fellowship in the world. The Church is, the Church is fellowship.

God forgive, God be praised, God forgive, God be praised, God forgive, God be praised....